False

Lama

The Life and Death of Dambijantsan

By Don Croner

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Chapter Two

The Early Life of Dambijantsan

Using the accounts of the Diluv Khutagt, Maisky, the Roerichs, and others who either knew Dambijantsan or gathered information from those who did, the findings of later researchers who had access to Mongolian and Russian archives, and my own preliminary research on the ground in Mongolia, I was finally ready to piece together a rough outline of his life.

Admittedly, some of the most basic biographical details remain elusive. Even his actual name is uncertain. "Dambijantsan" is a Mongolian name said to be based on the Tibetan words for "standard-bearer." George Roerich claims this name was rendered from the Tibetan "Ten-pei Jal-tsen (bsTsan-pa'I rgyal-mtshan)" but goes on to say that Dambijantsan's real name was "Palden (dPal-den)". Yet other sources suggest that his given name in Mongolian was Davaasambuu.[1] Yet Dambijantsan told Burdukov that his real name was Dawa, which may be just a shortened verson of Davaasambuu. But while Dambijantsan was ethnically Mongolian, he was born in Russia and was nominally a Russian citizen. Thus he reportedly also had the Russian, or at least semi-Russian, name of Amur Sanaev. This name would appear to be nothing more than a Russianized form of "Amarsanaaa." As we shall see, Amarsanaa was the Oirat chieftain who had led the last great Mongol revolt against the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s. Dambijantsan would eventually claim to be a descendant of Amarsanaa, and still later his reincarnation. That he was a actual lineal descendant of the Oirat chieftain seems highly unlikely, and a reincarnation a matter of speculation. If he was not related to Amarsanaa, it is really possible, as one Russian researcher maintains, that he was born into a family named Sanaev and given the name "Amur"?[2] The coincidence seems too great. Or was this just another alias chosen to further enhance his connection with the illustrious Amarsanaa, who according to legend would return and once again lead the Mongols in revolt against the Qing oppressors? In any case, both in the 1990s and as late as 1914 Dambijantsan was known to Russians in Mongolia as Amur Sanaev.[3] He also traveled under the Russian alias Ichin-

norov and was said to use the Tibetan aliases of Dawa Shabrong, Shiret Lama, and She-rap Lama. After arriving in Mongolia in the early 1890s he would acquire a whole host of Mongolian aliases and nicknames.

Dambijantsan's age is also a matter of dispute. His contemporaries had no clear idea of how old he was. Like the notorious Count St. Germain of eighteenth century Europe Dambijantsan had the curious trait of appearing ageless. The Diluv Khutagt, who knew him for a period of over thirty years, says simply, ""No one knew his real age. No one knew the real truth about him."[4] A. M. Pozdneev, writing in 1892, noted that Dambijantsan "was about thirty or forty years old." Yet A. V. Burdukov, who would become very well acquainted with Dambijantsan, stated that when he first met him, some twenty years later in 1912, "He looked a little over forty."[5] If we are believe these accounts it would appear that Dambijantsan aged very little between 1891 and 1912. These discrepancies in his appearance would cause some to speculate that there was more than one Dambijantsan, and that some witnesses had confused the various characters who had assumed his name. Indeed, as we shall see. several imposters did eventually appear in Mongolia, all claiming to be Dambijantsan.

After his death various researchers would claim that the Dambijantsan was born in 1860, although the actual source of this information is never quite clear.[6] One Mongolian scholar, apparently using a comment of Dambijantsan's on the astrological details of his birth, would claim he was born in 1862.[7] Lacking any more concrete information we will use 1860 as the probable date of his birth. This would make him thirty years old when he first arrived in Mongolia in 1890, fifty-two when he took part in the siege of Khovd in 1912, and sixty-three at the time of his assassination in 1923.

As we have seen Pozdneev as far back as 1892 was aware that Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk of the Little Dörböt tribe dwelling on the Caspian Steppe north of the Caspian Sea. But even this simple fact about Dambijantsan's life would later be obscured behind a welter of myths. In 1926 Owen Lattimore was told by caravan men on the Winding Road caravan route that Dambijantsan was variously a "a true Mongol" (i.e., Khalkh or Eastern Mongol), a Russian, or a Buryat from Siberia. "The most substantial story of all," opined Lattimore, "is that he a Chinese from Manchuria who had served in Mongolia as a herder of ponies for the princely firm of Ta Sheng K'uei."[8] He also relates that one of the things most remembered about Dambijantsan by those who had known or at least seen him was his habit of changing his dress every day or so from Russian to Mongolian to Chinese and back again. This constant changing of his clothes could only have added to the confusion about his origins.

Dambijantsan himself told A. V. Burdukov he was a Khalkh Mongol born at a place called Ashigkhorgyn Chuluu in the old Tüsheet Khan Aimag. That

Burdukov, who spoke Mongolian, apparently believed this story was strange, since several other people who knew Dambijantsan commented that he spoke the Khalkh dialect of the Mongolian language very poorly. Even to this day people in Gov-Altai Aimag remember stories about Dambijantsan's poor command of the Khalkh dialect and his use of the words from the Kalmyk or Western Mongolian form of the Mongolian language. (The Diluv Khutagt dissented: "Although he came from the Volga, he spoke the Khalkh dialect very well."[9]

Later evidence, including letters written by Dambijantsan himself, confirm that he was indeed a Kalmyk. One source maintains that he was born near the town of Aidarkhan, somewhere on the west bank of the Volga—the name no longer appears on modern maps—but again the original source of this information is unclear.[10] Pozdneev's assertion that Dambijantsan belonged to the Dörböt tribe, a subdivision of the Kalmyks, would also seem to be correct.

The people known as Kalmyks had left the main body of Oirats, or Western Mongols, most of whom were then concentrated in what is now western Mongolia and the Chinese province of Xinjiang, in the early seventeenth century and had migrated en masse westward to the steppes on either side of the Volga River north of the Caspian Sea, an area then nominally controlled by Russia. There they became the only enclave of Mongolians who practiced the traditional nomadic lifestyle in Europe.[11] Several different tribes, including the Torgut and the Dörböt, had made the migration. Each kept its name but they became known in general as Kalmyks. Thus Dambijantsan was a Kalmyk of the Dörböt tribe. Since by the time he was born Russia had asserted full control over the area he was a Russian citizen, a factor which was to play a crucial role in his life. Yet he always identified with Oirats, or Western Mongols, from which his tribe the Dörböt had originated, and would eventually assert that his real homeland was the traditional territories of the Oirats in western Mongolia and northwest China.

How the people who became known as Kalmyks, originally nomads from Inner Asia, ended up in Europe as citizens of the Russian Empire, on the steppes straddling the Volga River north of the Caspian Sea, is a fascinating tale in itself. The saga of the Kalmyks is part of the larger story of the conflict between the Eastern Mongols of Chingis Khan and his Chingisid descendants and the Western, or Oirat, Mongols. The roots of this story go back to the thirteen century when a basic division took place between the Chingisid Mongols and the Mongols who became known as Oirats.

The Oirats were originally a forest people who dwelt in the taiga and mixed steppe-woodlands west of Lake Baikal, around Lake Khövsgöl to the south, and the basins of the upper tributaries of the Yenisei River still farther west.

Their name might be based on the Mongolian word *oi*, which means "forest." We first hear of the Oirats in the *Yüan Chi*, or *History of the Yüan Dynasty*, where they are called *Wei-la* or *Wa-i-la*. Other thirteenth century documents refer them as the *Oira* or *Wan Oira*.[12] The Persian historian Rashid-al-din (1247–1318) referred to the Oirats by name and said they lived in the basins of the eight rivers which combine to form the Yenisei River.[13] These would include the Biy Khem and Ka Khem in what is now the autonomous republic of Tuva, the Shishigt Gol and its tributaries west of Lake Khövsgöl in Mongolia, and others. The *Yüan Chi* and Rashid-al-Din both report further that in 1204 the Oirat joined with the Naiman, a tribe which lived in the northwest of current-day Mongolia, and fought against Chingis Khan. This venture failed and in 1208 they submitted to Chingis, under whose his banner they then served as auxiliaries in the great military campaigns of the Chingisid Mongols. Later, in 1260–64, they sided with the rebellion of Arig Boga against Chingis's grandson and founder of the Yüan Dynasty Khubilai. After the defeat of Arig Boga they remained more or less subordinate to the Chingisids until after the fall of the Yüan Dynasty and the expulsion of the Mongols from China in 1368.

The Chingisids, shorn of their Chinese empire, regrouped around their old capital of Kharkhorum on the Orkhon River. In 1372 and again in 1388, huge armies mustered by the Ming, who had replaced the Mongols as rulers of the Celestial Empire, crossed the Gobi Desert into Mongolia, hoping to stamp out any chance of a Chingisid revival. The 1388 invasion, consisting of over 100,000 Chinese troops, crushed the Mongols in a decisive battle south Lake Buir in current-day Dornod Aimag, after which the reigning khan, Töqüz Temür, was assassinated by a disgruntled relative. In 1399 an Oirat commander killed one of the successors to Töqüz Temür, an event which signaled the decline of the Chingisid Mongols and the ascension of the Oirats.

Yet for the Mongols as a whole the rise of the Oirats posed a problem. According to the unwritten laws of the steppe only a Chingisid, a descendant of Chingis Khan, could be anointed as Great Khan. This stricture was so inviolate that even the great Tamerlane, whose military exploits rivaled those of Chingis himself, never dared to take the title of Great Khan for himself but instead tried to legitimize his rule in the eyes of his followers by marrying the Chingisid princess Saray Mulk-khanum, the daughter of Khazan, the last ruler of the Chagatai Khanate founded by Chagatai, Chingis's second son.[14] Thus the Eastern Chingisid Mongols considered themselves to be the only legitimate rulers of the Mongolian people and viewed the Oirats as upstarts and usurpers who must forever remain their subordinates. Yet the Oirats would soon throw up great leaders who created empires which rivaled and surpassed the power of the Eastern Mongols. They would attack China itself and even

dreamed of restoring the Yüan Dynasty which the Eastern Mongols had allowed to crumble away in their hands.

By 1434 the Oirat chieftain Toghan, after half a century of internecine Mongol warfare, had melded the four main tribes—the Torgut, Dörböt, Khoshut, and Choros (sometimes known as the Khoit), also known as the Four Confederate—into the first Oirat Empire. At its height in the mid-fifteenth century the Oirat realm stretched from Lake Baikal west to Lake Balkash in what is now Kazakhstan, and from Baikal south to the Great Wall of China. It included of much of current-day Mongolia, including the former capital of Kharkhorum, and in the west ruled over the Zungarian Basin, the slopes of the Tian Shan, and the oasis city of Hami in what is now Xinjiang. In the early 1440s Toghan's son Esen assumed control of the Oirat Empire. Although the ruler of a huge swatch of Inner Asia, as an Oirat he could not claim to be the Great Khan of all the Mongols. In an effort to legitimize his rule Esen married off his daughter to Toghto-Bukha, a descendant of Chingis Khan, who then assumed the more-or-less ceremonial title of khan, while Esen ruled as hegemon. Soon he would challenge the Ming dynasty itself.

The immediate source of conflict was over trade relations. The Oirats wanted free and open trade with China, while the Ming tended to consider commercial relations with the so-called barbarians of the steppe as beneath them.[15] (One Ming emperor's distain for the nomads to the north went so far as to issue an order that the Chinese characters for "barbarian" be written as small as possible in all official records.[16]) Also, according to one source, Esen was promised a Ming princess as a wife by the Ming emperor Yingzong. When the bride was not forthcoming Esen used this as a pretext to invade China.[17]

The twenty-one year-old emperor Yingzong thirsted for military glory, and under the baleful influence of a court eunuch named Wang Zhen he unwisely decided to himself lead an army into battle and confront the Mongols before they could reach Beijing. On August 4 1449 the Ming army with Yingzong at its head left the capital and headed west toward Datong. After sixteen days it became apparent that the badly organized and ill-equipped force was incapable of confronting the Oirats under Esen. A retreat was ordered, but on September 1 Esen's forces cornered the Ming army at a place called Tumu, sixty some miles north of Beijing and twenty-five miles or so beyond the Great Wall in what is now Hubei Province. Most if not all of the army of 50,000 Chinese was annihilated, and most humiliatingly of all emperor Yingzong was taken prisoner. His advisor the eunuch Wang Zhen was cut down on the field of battle, according to one version of the story dispatched by disgruntled Chinese soldiers who realized too late they had been led like sheep to the

slaughter.[18]

A month or two later Esen was camped in the suburbs of Beijing. Although a master of steppe warfare he was unable to master the siege tactics necessary to overpower the walled and fortified capital. His royal hostage was of no help either. Yingzong's younger brother Prince Cheng had assumed the vacant throne and taken the title of Jingtai Emperor. Esen had hoped to gain great concessions in return for the person of Yingzong but now the Ming court was in no hurry at all to get him back. After Ming reinforcements from other cities began converging on Beijing and the Mongol horses had eaten most of the available grass around the capital Esen decided to return to the more hospitable steppes of Mongolia. Eventually Esen released Yingzong, but upon the latter's return to Beijing he was placed under virtual house arrest in an out-of-the-way palace in the southeast corner of the Forbidden City and ignored, while his younger brother continued to rule. Yingzong did eventually retake his throne, but the details of these events are outside the scope of our narrative.

For a brief moment while the Oirats were camped outside Beijing it had appeared that Esen was about to retake the throne of China lost by the Chingisids in 1368 and install a new version of the Yüan Dynasty. Esen's success was short-lived however. He had not been able to take Beijing, had not received the anticipated massive ransom for Yingzong, and in fact had very little to show in the way of plunder for his great victory on the battlefield at Tumu. Yet he had become so emboldened by his military feat that in 1453 he had his Chingisid son-in-law assassinated and he himself assumed the title of Great Khan of all the Mongols. As an Oirat he had no right to make such a claim; some considered him an usurper and in 1455 he himself was assassinated by disgruntled Mongols. The Oirat Empire depended on large part on the person of Esen, and with him gone it rapidly began to disintegrate.

The Eastern Mongols, who as descendants of Chingis Khan claimed to be the only legitimate rulers of Mongolia, were still in the throes of a long period of internal strife. Mandagul Khan, the twenty-seventh successor of Chingis Khan, was killed in a struggle with his great-nephew Bolkho, and after Bolkho himself was assassinated his five year-old son Dayan was place on the throne. Khan Mandagul's widow Mandukhai took the little boy under her wing and acting as his de-facto regent assumed command herself of the Mongol armies. Later she took the extraordinary step of marrying him, the son of the great-nephew of her deceased husband, thus making herself *khatun*, or queen of the Eastern Mongols. Under the leadership of Khatun Mandukhai —now a much revered and venerated figure in Mongolian history—the Eastern Mongols were able to subdue the then disorganized Oirats and by the 1490s reas-

sert the supremacy of the Chingisids. "It is to her that tradition gives credit for having overthrown Oirat supremacy and restored the hegemony to the eastern Mongols," proclaims historian of the steppes René Grousset.[19]

Dayan Khan's grandson Altan Khan (r. 1543–83), who ruled the Tümed Mongols on the steppe north of the Ordos Desert, in what is now Inner Mongolia, continued the struggle against the Oirats, pushing them northward and westward of his domains. Meanwhile Dayan Khan's son Geresenje had taken as his inheritance much of what is now the country of Mongolia. When he died these lands were parceled out to his descendants and eventually became the Tüsheet, Zasagt, Setsen. and the Altan khanates,

By the 1550s the combined forces of the Eastern Mongols had driven the Oirats out of central Mongolia, recapturing the ancient Mongol capital of Kharkhorum in 1552. The Oirat retreated to the west of the Khangai Mountains, but continued pressure by Altan Khan of the Khalkh (please don't confuse him with Altan Khan of the Tümed) at the beginning of the seventeenth century pushed them still farther west, beyond the Altai Mountains into the valleys of the Black Irtysh, Ili, and the Imil, in what is now Xinjiang in China, and onto the steppes of southern Siberia in what is now Russia.

But now, as if to counteract their diminishing influence, a charismatic new leader arose among the Oirat. This was Khara-Khula, who dreamed of recreating the Oirat Empire which had flourished under Esen in the fifteen century and even retaking the throne of China which had been so improvidently squandered by the Chingisid Mongols. Khara-Khula belonged to the Choros, one of the four tribes which had up the Oirat Confederation. He began his rise to power around 1600 and by In 1606, faced with rising power of the Khalkh Altan Khan to the east, the other three confederates—the Torgut, Dörböt, and Khoshut, accepted his leadership.

By 1608–1609 he and the Oirats confronted Altan Khan and halted the westward advance of the Khalkh. Skirmishes continued for the next decade, until in 1619 all-out war broke out between Khara-Khula and Altan Khan. At first Altan Khan prevailed, but the Oirats fought back and by 1725 had driven the Eastern Mongols out of the Zungarian Basin in what is now Xinjiang. This would remain a Oirat stronghold until they were completely defeated by forces of the Qing Dynasty in the 1750s.

While the other three confederates had accepted Khara-Khula's leadership against Altan Khan they were not happy with the subordinate position they had assumed in the Oirat Confederation. Faced with both the rise of Khara-Khula, who threatened their independence, and the continuing incursions into their traditional grazing lands by the Eastern Mongols, some chose to leave Inner Asia altogether. Thus began the great migration westward of the people who would become known as Kalmyks. It was among these Kalmyks

that Dambijantsan would emerge.

The Torgut who lived in the upper Irtysh River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China were particularly susceptible to pressure from the Altan Khan centered just to the north in what are now the Mongolian aimags of Khovd and Bayan-Ölgii. Hearing of rich pasture land to the west the Torgut chieftain Kho-Urlük had sent out scouts west to search for new grazing lands as early as 1608. Starting in the summer of 1615 some 15,000 Torgut starting moving westward toward the steppes south of the Siberian towns of Tara, Tiumen, and Tobolsk. In the early 1630s the Torgut, along with a contingent of Dörböt and a smattering of dissatisfied Choros and Khoshut, moved still farther westward to the rich steppes north of the Caspian Sea, described by historian of the Kalmyks Michael Khodarkovsky as "pastoral El Dorado, glorified in songs and epics of many nomadic people."[20] The Torgut alone who migrated may have numbered over 200,000. These new arrivals quickly overcame the disorganized nomads already inhabiting the area and by the beginning of the 1640s occupied the entire Caspian Steppe from the Emba River in the east to the Terek River in the west, including the rich basin of the lower Volga River, the biggest tributary of the Caspian Sea.

These are the people who became known as Kalmyks, a word about which there is some dispute. It would appear that the word *Kalmyk* was used to describe Oirats as far back as the fourteenth century by Arab geographer abn Alvardi.[21] This was of course long before the migration to the West of the people now known as Kalmyks. Some popular and even scholarly literature continues to refer to the Western Mongols, or Oirats, who did not migrate to the West as Kalmyks. I adapt here the usage proposed by Khodarkovksy and "reserve the name Kalmyk only for the group of Oirats who came from Jungaria to roam the Caspian steppes in the early sixteenth century."[22]

For the next hundred years or so the Kalmyks nomadized on the steppe north of the Caspian Sea while gradually acceding to the overall authority of the Russian government. In 1724 they officially accepted Russian suzerainty. By the 1740s, however, relations between the nomads and the Russian empire began to deteriorate. One of the main bones of contention was the continuing encroachment of Russian colonists into the Kalmyk pasture lands. Cossacks from the Don River began emigrating to the lower Volga, followed by Russian and Ukrainian settlers. They built towns, established industries, and began plowing up the traditional Kalmyk pasture lands. By the mid-1740s some 10,000 Kalmyk families no longer had enough livestock to support themselves. Many were forced to take work with commercial fishing operations and other Russian-owned industries. Between the years 1764 to 1768 alone more than one hundred new settlements of Russian and Ukrainian colonists were

established on the lower Volga. The Kalmyks who attempted to maintain their nomadic lifestyle were shoved off onto arid, inhospitable desert-steppe far from the major rivers.

Another contentious issue was the forced recruitment of Kalmyk cavalrymen into various Russian military campaigns. When they had first arrived on the Caspian steppe the Kalmyks were more than wiling to help the Russians in campaigns against other nomads who were competing with them for pasture lands and from whom they could expect considerable booty, the traditional motivation for steppe warfare. As the Kalmyks became more and more impoverished they were less and less eager to fight those with whom they had no real beef and from whom no immediate treasure would be forthcoming. The matter came to a head when the Russo-Ottoman War broke out in 1768 and empress Catherine II tried to impress 20,000 Kalmyk cavalrymen to fight the Ottoman Empire and its minions. The Kalmyks could only provide 10,000 men and after disputes with the Russian army commanders many of these deserted.

Then there was the dispute over religion. The Kalmyks had continued to practice the Tibetan form of Buddhism which they had brought with them from Inner Asia. They maintained close ties with Tibet and regularly sent embassies to the Dalai Lama. Kalmyk lamas went to Tibet for training and Kalmyk noblemen others who could afford it (the roundtrip often took several years) made pilgrimages to Lhasa and other religious sites in Tibet. As their political and economic situation deteriorated, however, the Kalmyks came under more and more pressure to convert to Russian Orthodox Christianity. According to Khodarkovsky:

> The Russian government encouraged conversion by all possible feasible means. Those Kalmyks who chose to convert and settle down with the Don Cossacks were put on the military payroll and for the next few years were paid a higher salary than the cossacks. On other occasions, the [converted] Kalmyks were granted tax exemptions for three to five years. The Kalmyk tayishis [noblemen] who chose to convert were rewarded with handsome salaries and could live in towns or settlements especially built for them.[23]

When Donduk-Dashi Khan (r.1741–61) attempted to build a Buddhist temple in Astrakhan, the largest city on the lower Volga, he was told by the Russian government in St. Petersburg that "it was not appropriate to build a temple for idol worshipping in the empire of Her Majesty . . ."[24] Traditional-minded Kalmyks in general were deeply offended by these assaults on their religious beliefs. Some noblemen were so infuriated by what they viewed as subversion of their Buddhism-based society that they burned down settlements of Christian converts. Russo-Kalmyk relations were quickly reaching their nadir.

As early as 1747 some Kalymks, intensely disillusioned with life in Russia, had raised the possibility of leaving the country altogether and returning to their original homeland in Inner Asia. The sentiment picked up steam throughout the 1750s and 60s. In 1771, at long last, the Kalmyks had had enough. They decided to return to Inner Asia. Thus began the tragic epic of the Kalmyk Migration, what Khodarkovsky calls "the last known exodus of a nomadic people in the history of Asia."[25]

In late 1770 the nobleman Tsebek-Dorji had addressed the issue in a speech to the governing council of the Kalmyk Khan:

> Look how your rights are being limited in all respects. Russian officials mistreat you and the government wants to make peasants out of you. The banks of the Yayik and Volga are now covered with cossack settlements, and the northern borders of your steppes are inhabited by Germans. In a little while, the Don, Terek, and Kum will also be colonized and you will be pushed to the waterless steppes and the only source of your existence, your herds, will perish. Ubashi's son has already been ordered give as a hostage, and three hundred from among the noble Kalmyks are to reside in the Russian capital. You can see your situation, and in the future you will have two options—either to carry your burden of slavery, or to leave Russia and thus end your misfortunes. Dalai Lama himself selected two years in which a migration to Jungaria could be undertaken. These two years have arrived. So your present decision will determine your future."[26]

Ubashi Khan and Louzang Jalchin, the head lama of the Kalmyks, agreed that the time had come to act. At this time the majority of the Kalmyks, including most of the Torgut, were on the east side of the Volga. The Dörböt and Khoshut, along a few Torgut, were on the west side. Ubashi Khan himself had moved to the east side of the Volga in the autumn of 1770. The decision to leave Russia had been made, but Ubashi wanted to wait until the Volga was frozen over so the Kalmyks on the west side could cross over and join the exodus. Events forced his hand. Rumors of the planned departure of the Kalymks had leaked out and there was a chance the Russians would take military action to stop them. Then Russian authorities called up 10,000 more Kalmyk cavalryman for service with the Russian army. This was the last straw. On the morning of January 5 all the Kalmyks on the east side of the Volga—31,000 families, some 150,000 men, women, and children, mounted up and headed eastward to Inner Asia. Various detachments of Cossacks, Russians, and Bashkirs (Moslem tribesmen) were send to halt the escaping Kalmyks and force them to return to the Russian dominions, but they were outnumbered and eventually returned empty-handed. The Kalmyk horde reached the banks of the Emba River, where they camped while awaiting Spring and fresh grass. Yet

more detachments of Russian troops were set out after the Kalmyks but they too were rebuffed. The Kalmyks moved on and by early June had reached Lake Balkash in what is now Kazakhstan. Here they encountered their hereditary enemies the Kazakhs, who were thirsting for revenge for earlier Kalmyk attacks against them. Outnumbered and surrounded, the Kalmyks only managed to escape by means of an unexpected night-time breakout and a forced march onward. Most of their sheep herds they had brought with them were lost in the fighting and soon famine set in. By the time they reached the Ili River in what is now Xinjiang Province of China over 100,000 Kalmyks had died from fighting, famine, and lack of water. The survivors, numbering at most 50,000, were greeted by Qing officials and given emergency aid of tents, wheat, rice, sheep, and other commodities.

The Qing viewed the return of the Kalmyks as a huge propaganda victory, demonstrating to other nomads the advantages of living under Chinese rather than Russian rule. The Qianlong emperor found even greater significant in the return of the Kalmyks. His mother Hsin-mao was celebrating her 80th birthday in 1771 and in her honor Qianlong had commissioned the construction of an enormous temple in the Qing summer resort of Jehol (current-day Chengde). The Putuozongcheng Temple, as it was called, was supposed to be replica of the Potala in Lhasa. Then came news of the return of the Kalmyks, coinciding with the dedication of the temple. Qianlong caused a stele to be erected at the temple with an inscription on it in Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Manchurian which read in part:

> Our vassals over the border all believe in the religion of Sakyamuni. Jehol was the spot where our grandfather the Emperor K'ang-his [the Kangxi Emperor], pacified and appeased them, and there he granted them audiences . . . Now the temple is finished in time for a great national event [Hsin-mao's birthday] that is to be celebrated by all, in a unique manner . . . In addition to this, the Torgot [Kalmyks, including the Torgut], who have lived in Russia for some time, have returned for religious reasons. The whole of their tribe—which numbers many ten-thousands—arrived just at this time, after wandering about for more than six months. Here is a connection that is mystic.[27]

Ubashi himself was invited to Jehol and sumptuously wined and dined by Qianlong. He was told he could keep his title of Khan but in fact his people were divided into separate banners and dispersed throughout Xinjiang. They were now under Qing jurisdiction and Ubashi was their ruler in name only. Despite Qianlong's honeyed words, the Kalmyks quickly discovered that Qing rule was anything but benign. As Khodarkovsky puts it, "The Kalmyks had escaped Russian tentacles only to be ensnared in Chinese ones."[28]) (The immense pile of the Putuozongcheng Temple, which is actually little more

than a hollow façade, looms over the city of Chengde to this day; Qianlong's stele is still prominently displayed out front.)

In the meantime, Russian Empress Catherine II was infuriated that 150,000 of her subjects had managed to escape her domains. She issued ultimatums to the Qing government demanding the return of "these rogues and traitors" but they were ignored.

This great exodus of the Kalmyks inspired Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), the eccentric English author perhaps better known for his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* to pen an ode entitled *Revolt of the Tartars*, which begins with an exegesis of the whole episode:

> There is no great event in modern history, or, perhaps it may be said more broadly, none in all history, from its earliest records, less generally known, or more striking to the imagination, than the flight eastwards of a principal Tartar nation across the boundless steppes of Asia in the latter half of the last century. The *terminus a quo* of this flight and the *terminus ad quem* are equally magnificent—the mightiest of Christian thrones being the one, the mightiest of pagan the other; and the grandeur of these two terminal objects is harmoniously supported by the romantic circumstances of the flight. In the abruptness of its commencement and the fierce velocity of its execution we read an expression of the wild, barbaric character of the agents. In the unity of purpose connecting this myriad of wills, and in the blind but unerring aim at a mark so remote, there is something which recalls to the mind those almighty instincts that propel the migrations of the swallow and the leeming [*sic*] or the life-withering marches of the locust. Then, again, in the gloomy vengeance of Russia and her vast artillery, which hung upon the rear and the skirts of the fugitive vassals, we are reminded of Miltonic images--such, for instance, as that of the solitary hand pursuing through desert spaces and through ancient chaos a rebellious host, and overtaking with volleying thunders those who believed themselves already within the security of darkness and of distance.

As we know, Dambijantsan was a member of the Dörböt tribe. The Dörböt, who in the early years of the Kalmyk occupation of the Caspian steppe had roamed the westernmost stretches of the Kalmyk realm, along the River Don, a tributary of the Azov Sea, had in 1743 been moved en masse further east to the steppes bordering the west bank of the Volga River by Donduk Dashi Khan, who had been granted power over them by the Russian government.[29] Residing as they did on the west bank of the Volga, most if not all of the Dörböts remained behind after the great migration of the Kalmyks back to Zungaria in 1771.

In retaliation for the exodus the Russian government on October 19 1771 stripped these remaining Kalmyks of "the last vestige of their political independence" and ordered that they all remain of the west side of the Volga River

year-round.[30] Thus it was on the Caspian Steppes on the west bank of the Volga that Dambijantsan was born, perhaps as we have posited, in 1860. As noted, he may have been born into the Sanaev family, but this is by no means certain. From his very earliest age he must have been aware that he was one of the 'left behind people," and that the vast majority of his fellow Mongols were off somewhere to the east in Inner Asia. He would spend most of his life trying to reconnect with these people.

At the time Dambijantsan was born, at the beginning of the 1860s, Tibetan Buddhism, despite the continued pressure to convert the Kalmyks to Russian Orthodoxy, was still prevalent in Kalmykia, the land of the Kalmyks. In all likelihood Dambijantsan was born into a family which adhered to Buddhism to one degree or another. The first news we hear of him is that at the age of seven he was supposedly enrolled as a novice in a Buddhist monastery in Dolonnuur, in what is now the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia. Maisky heard this story while in western Mongolia in 1919, when Dambijantsan was still alive. Dolonnuur was firmly in the orbit of the Eastern Mongols, the Chahar of Inner Mongolia and Khalkh of what was then considered Outer Mongolia, and at first glance it appears strange that a young Dörböt from the Volga River in Russia would have gravitated there. Kalmyks wishing to enter a monastery outside of Kalmykia, we would think, would have been more drawn to western China, including the modern-day provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Gansu, the traditional strongholds of the Torgut, Dörbot, and other Oirats, both those who not migrated westward in the early seventeenth century and those who had returned in the great exodus of 1771. Fred Adelman, in his introduction to Pozdneev's *Mongolia and Mongols* makes precisely this objection, and John Gaunt in his doctoral thesis on Dambijantsan repeats it: "it would be unlikely to find a Volga Kalmuk at Doloon Nuur, as they were not oriented toward Inner Mongolia's monastic net."[31]

The French scholar Isabelle Charleux, an expert on Inner Mongolian monasteries, disagrees: "There were many monks and students [at Dolonnuur] from all of the Mongol world, given the reputation of the Dolonnuur monasteries that attracted people from very far away . . . The Dolonnuur monasteries were not only connected with the Khalkh Mongols; but also with the Inner Mongolians of Alashan and Kholun Buir . . . Also the migrant population of the Chahar banners included many Oirat Mongols. If Dambijantsan's parents were especially fond of the Dolonnuur monasteries—because they knew a lama there, because of the reputation of the monasteries, etc.—they would have sent their child there."[32]

A Russian researcher adds that Dambijantsan's parents moved to Inner Mongolia "for all the usual reasons"—presumably they were traders—when

he was a very small boy, which would explain how the seven-year old boy ended up there.[33] Therefore it is entirely possible that this entry into Dambijantsan's *curriculum vitae* was not simply a later invention meant to burnish this reputation among the Khalkh Mongols but that he actually was enrolled as a monk at Dolonnuur at an early age. In any case, this is the last we hear of his parents.

Dolonnuur (*doloon* = seven, *nuur* = lake; Seven Lakes) is located in the grasslands (now suffering from increasing desertification) 210 miles north of Beijing, about fifty-two miles beyond the first major pass leading to the Mongolian Plateau. The area is much hallowed in Mongolian history. Fourteen miles from the current town of Dolonnuur is the site of Shangdu, originally established in 1256 as the headquarters of Chingis Khan's grandson Khubilai. After Khubilai founded the Yüan Dynasty he made what is now Beijing the primary capital of his empire, but he retained Shangdu as his summer capital, where he and his court retired each year to escape the enervating heat of the North China Plain. Shangdu was destroyed in the so-called "Red Scarf Rebellion" of 1358, a precursor to the upheavals which led to the fall of the Yuan Dynasty in 1368 and the rise of the Ming Dynasty. Later the city became known to some as the Xiancheng, or Apparition City, since people claimed that at certain times the old city as it was in the days of Khubilai appeared suddenly before their eyes and then disappeared just as quickly, leaving only the ruins as we see them today. Shangdu is also remembered as the subject of Coleridge's much celebrated poem "Xanadu":

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea . . .

The ruins are now a popular tourist attraction and the area still serves as a summer getaway, only now not for Mongol potentates but for Beijing's middle classes. More important to our story, however, it was at nearby Dolonnuur that in 1691 a fateful meeting took place between the Kangxi emperor of China and Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia and the nominal head of the Khalkh Mongols.

When we last left Khara Khula he was organizing the four tribes of the Oirat into the Oirat Confederation. He died in 1634 and his son Baatar-Khongtaiji then assumed the throne. In 1635 the Dalai Lama officially recognized Baatar-Khongtaiji as the leader of the Oirats and gave him the title of *Yerdyen*.[34] By

1640 Baatar-Khongtaiji's realm become known as the Zungarian Khanate.[35] The name derives from the Mongol *zuun gar*, "left hand", or "eastern side"; although the Oirats dwelt in the western end of the lands inhabited by Mongol peoples, the Choros tribe to which Khara Khula and Baatar-Khongtaiji's belonged was the easternmost of the Oirat confederation and thus on the "left hand" looking southward, as the Mongols always oriented themselves.[36]

Following a long internecine struggle between Baatar-Khongtaiji's offspring, replete with fratricide and rivers of blood, Galdan, probably the youngest of his eleven or so sons, seized the reins of the Zungarian Khanate. Under Galdan the Zungarian Khanate eventually encompassed a huge swath of Inner Asia, including the western edge of current-day Mongolia, the current-day Chinese province of Xinjiang, including the Silk Road cities of Hami, Turpan, and Kashgar, the legendary cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in what is now Uzbekistan, and the eastern part of current-day Kazakhstan. Although little remembered today, during Galdan's reign the Zungarian Khanate was a formidable adversary of both Czarist Russia and Qing-Dynasty China.

Galdan would become one of the role models of Dambijantsan, and we will return for a more detailed examination of his career in good time. Suffice it to say here that in 1688 Galdan, hoping to add the territory of the Khalkh Mongols to the Zungarian Empire, invaded what is now the country of Mongolia. Meeting little opposition from the disorganized Khalkh, his army first trashed the great monastery of Erdene Zuu, built on site of the old Mongol capital of Kharkhorum, and the monastery at Khögno Khan Uul (now known as Khögnö Taryn Khiid), just to the east. Advancing eastward, Galdan's men then demolished Saridgiin Khiid, located in the Khentii Mountains north of Ulaan Baatar, the monastery which had been established by Zanabazar himself and intended to be the center of Buddhism in Mongolia. Zanabazar, his brother Chakhuundorj the Tüsheet khan, the leaders of the other Khalkh khanates, and, according to one source, at least 30,000 of their followers fled southeastward before the advance of Galdan's troops, eventually reaching the edge of the Mongolian Plateau near Dolonnuur, land of the Chahar Mongols, who had already accepted the authority of the Qing Dynasty. Here the Khalkh Mongols, by now almost destitute, threw themselves at mercy of the Qing emperor Kangxi.[37]

Dolonnuur was at that time already an important monastic center, with no less then twelve incarnate lamas in residence. The town, strategically located at the edge of the Mongolian plateau, was also a busy Chinese-Mongolian entrepôt. Because of deposits of copper ore nearby it become a center of mining and smelting, and its factories were well-known for their weapons, and later its workshops better known for the bronze Buddhist artwork of the Dolonnuur School.

The Kangxi emperor, apprized of the arrival of the Khalkh Mongols in his domains, decided to meet with their leaders and if possible bring them into the fold of the Qing Dynasty. He left Beijing on May 9, 1691 and made his leisurely way north, stopping to do a spot of hunting on the way. From May 29 to June 3 Kangxi finally meet with Zanabazar and the other Khalkh leaders in Dolonnuur. A great banquet was followed by a display of Qing might in the form of cannons, newly acquired from Jesuits in Beijing, the firing of which caused the Mongols "to tremble with fear and admiration," at least according to Qing sources.[38] The upshot of all this was that in exchange for protection from the forces of Galdan Bolshigt and a promise from Kangxi to restore to the Khalkh their lost lands in Mongolia, Zanabazar accepted the suzerainty of the Qing Dynasty, in effect making Mongolia a province of China. The country which Chingis Khan and his sons had conquered and his grandson Khubilai had once ruled as the first emperor of the Mongol Yüan Dynasty now dominated Mongolia. Mongolia would remain under Chinese control until 1911, when the Qing Dynasty fell. Those 220 years of subjugation by the Qing Empire are seen by some as a direct consequence of Zanabazar's capitulation to Kangxi, and as a result many Mongolians resent him to this day. Dambijantsan himself would devote the greater part of his life to undoing what Zanabazar had done and restoring the independence of Mongolia.

But that was all in the future. In 1691, In honor of his meeting with Zanabazar and the capitulation of the Mongols, Kangxi ordered the construction of what would become the Khökh Süm, or Blue Temple. (One prominent Mongolian incarnation, the Kanjurwa Khutagt [1914–1980], maintains that on the contrary Mongol nobles built the temple in honor of Kangxi, a telling interpretation of events from a Mongol viewpoint.[39]) The Khökh Süm was completed around 1700 and it eventually began the center of a sizable monastery. About a half mile away, the Shar Süm, Yellow Temple, was built between 1729 and 1731 and it too became the foundation of a monastery. Both monasteries were overseen by a line of incarnate lamas known as the Jangjya Khutagts. Sedendonub, the first Jangjya Khutagt, was instructed by Kangxi himself to "spend the chilly wintertime in Peking and in the summertime heat govern here and the direct the local clergy."[40] The Jangjya Khutagts maintained residences at both the Blue Temple and the Yellow Temple. The second Jangjya Khutagt, Rölpé Dorjé, was described by one scholar as "an intimate of the Qianlong emperor and thus perhaps the most powerful Tibetan hierarch in the Qing Empire."[41] Dolonnuur's importance as a monastic center was underlined by the fact that the Third Panchen Lama visited here during his trip to China in 1780. The Panchen Lamas along with the Dalai Lamas were the highest ranking incarnate lamas in Tibet. The Panchen Lama arrived in Dolonnuur on the 20th day of the 6th month, and according to hagiographic

Tibetan accounts was greeted by one million people, although this is almost certainly an exaggeration. In any case, while in Dolonnuur the Panchen Lama reportedly "performed a purification ritual that pacified the restless demons of Mongolia."[42] He also gave Yamantaka initiation to the Jangjya Khutagt and read prayers dedicated to the sacred land of Shambhala, a realm for which he had already written a guidebook entitled *Shambhala Lamyig*.

From Dolonnuur the Panchen Lama proceeded to the Qing Summer Resort at Jehol where he was amazed to discover not only a huge replica of the Potala in Lhasa, already alluded to, but also a replica of his own Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse. This complex of temples and facades, known as the Xumifoushou Miao (Happiness and Longevity Temple of Mt. Sumeru) was hurriedly constructed in 1779 and early 1780 by order of the Qianlong emperor. In front of it he had placed yet another stele declaring that the complex had been built to provide the Panchen Lama with "a restful place for meditation."[43] The Xumifoushou Miao too is now a major tourist attraction. Unfortunately, the Panchen Lama never returned to Tibet from this trip. From Jehol he proceeded Beijing to where he contracted small pox and died in late November of 1780.

The Russian ethnographer A. M. Podzneev visited Dolonuur in 1893. By then the monastic center seems to have lost some of its luster. The Yellow Temple had some 400 monks and the Khökh Temple some 500, not a lot compared to monasteries in Lhasa in Tibet and Örgöö (now Ulaan Baatar] in Mongolia. The fourth Jangjya Khutagt, who died in 1891, spent most of his life in Beijing and had not visited Dolonnuur in fifty years. Pozdneev was by that time a very seasoned traveler in Mongolia and China but even he was shocked by conditions in Dolonnuur: "It would be hard to imagine anything dirtier and in greater disarray than Doloon Nuur's street and alleys. The street in all Chinese cities are normally narrow and dirty, but here they are even narrower and dirtier . . . In the rainy season these ditches used as thoroughfares are so full of water and mud that some of the streets become iiterally impassable."[44] Presumably this is more-or-less the same Dolonnuur Dambijantsan would have experienced in the late 1860s when he arrived there at the age of seven and became a novice monk.

The beginnings of Dambijantsan's monastic career are unclear. He may have taken the preliminary vow known as *Rabjun*, which is given to young boys when they first enter a monastery. In addition to learning to read and write Mongolian, he probably began to study at least written Tibetan, since at that time most Buddhist texts were in the Tibetan language, and he he would have received lessons in elementary Buddhism teachings, including the doctrines of the Gelug, or Yellow Hat, sect, one of the four main divisions of Tibetan

Buddhism and the one to which the Dalai Lama belonged.

From his fellow Mongolian students, many of them from Khalkh Mongolia, the young boy who had been born in Russia may have imbibed the anti-Manchu sentiment then growing among a people ever-increasingly impoverished by their Qing masters. And perhaps he even got a sense that all was not well in the Qing Dynasty itself, then still reeling from the disastrous Second Opium War of 1856–60. In 1860, the year Dambijantsan was born, British and French forces had entered Bejing and sacked the Summer Palace, then forced on the Qing government to sign the so-called Peking Convention, which opened several Chinese ports to foreign trade, gave foreigners the right to travel in the interior of China, alllowed Christian missionaries into the country, and, perhaps most importantly, legalized the importation of opium, the mainstay of British trade at the time. It was a blow from which the Qing Dynasty would never really recover. The emperor Xianfeng, totally mortified by China's defeat in the Opium War and the onerous settlement forced on him by the foreign powers, died a broken man a year later at the age of twenty-nine. One of his concubines would lead a coup état and subsequently rule China for the next forty-seven years as the Empress Dowager Cixi, overseeing the slow but inexorable decline leading to the final extinguishment of the Qing Dynasty. When the Qing Dynasty finally did fall, in 1911–12, Dambijantsan would be in western Mongolian, leading the fight for Mongolian independence.

Maisky and George Roerich both allude to Dambijantsan's youthful soujourn in Dolonuur but give no details.[45] According to one of his Russian biographers he excelled in his studies and was soon marked out for advancement in the lamaistic community. Talented and ambitious young monks were inevitably drawn to Lhasa, the wellspring and lodestone of Tibetan Buddhism, so it is not surprising that Dambijantsan would have set his sights on the Tibetan capital. There was a problem, however. Although a Kalmyk, he was apparently a Russian citizen, and most foreigners, including even Buddhists from Russia, were not allowed into Tibet. The earlier fraternal ties the Kalmyks had enjoyed with Tibet had ended at least a hundred years before. But as a Mongolian-speaking Kalmyk studying in Doloonuur he might well have been able to pass himself off as a Khalkh from Mongolia. As such he would have been allowed to travel to Tibet and enroll in a monasteries there. As we shall see, he would not have been the only Russian citizen to attempt this ploy. Dambijantsan's propensity for assumed false identities might well have begun at this point.

In any event, we soon find Dambijantsan in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and home of the Dalai Lama, enrolled in the Drepung Monastery, one of the "Great Three" monasteries of Tibet, along with Sera and Gandan. Drepung

(literally "rice heap") Monastery had been founded in 1416 by Jamyang Chöje Tashi Pelden ("Dashi-baldan" in Mongolian accounts), born in Tibet near Samye Monastery, and a close disciple of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug sect. He was believed to be the eleventh appearance of Javzandamba, the line of incarnations of which Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, was the sixteenth. In addition to Drepung, he established more than one hundred other monasteries, retreat centers, and hermitages all over Tibet.[46]

Drepung, located at the base of Gambo Utse Mountain about five miles west of the Potala, was once reputed to be the largest Buddhist monastery in the world, with as many as 8,000 monks in residence. The second, third and fourth Dalai Lamas lived at Drepung—this was before the completion of the Potala, later the residence of the Dalai Lamas—and their bodies were emtombed here. Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia stayed at Drepung during his visits to Tibet in the years 1649–51 and 1655–56. Drepung was divided into colleges (*dratsangs*) which specialized in a particular teaching or hosted monks from some specific area in the Buddhist world. One college, for example, hosted monks from Kham, in eastern Tibet. Gomang College was famous for its Mongolian monks, and it was here that Dambijantsan gravitated.

Drepung in general was renowned as an institute of higher learning, with many monks studying for fifteen or twenty year to achieve the Buddhist equivalent of a doctrate degree. Any monk aspiring to reach the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings could fulfill his ambitions here. According to George Roerich, Dambijantsan spent "many years" at Drepung. Unfortunately we do not know who his teachers were, what specific teachings he specialized in, or what initiations he might have taken. His years at Gomang College were not wasted, however. "People who knew him well," according to Roerich, "affirm that his knowledge of Buddhist metaphysics and secret Tantric teachings was unusually vast and it seems he enjoyed a high reputation among the high lamas of Mongolia."[47]

Later in life Dambijantsan would claim that the met the great Buryat-Mongol lama Agvan Dorzhieff while in Tibet. He did not relate when and where they met, but they both would have been at Drepung Monastery at about the same time, and it is quite possible they crossed paths at Gomang College, the traditional haunt of Mongolian monks in Lhasa. If their paths did not cross they certainly moved in parellell directions. Both were of Mongols born in Russia; both would study in Tibet, both would enter the political realm—Dorzhieff in Tibet and Dambijantsan in Mongolia; both would dream of estabishing a Buddhist-oriented realm on Inner Asia; and both were men who assumed very public roles but whose lives were always surrounded in mystery.

Look behind the curtains of late nineteenth-early twentieth century Russo-Tibeto-Mongolian affairs and you are more than likely to find there, directing the hesitant actors, prompting the tongue-tied, and ready to stride on stage himself whenever necessary, the enigmatic figure of the always-present but paradoxically ever-elusive Dorzhieff, or Ngawang Losang, as he was known in Tibetan. Dorzhiev was born in the valley of the Uda River, which flows into the Selenga River at the city of Ulaan Ude (in Dorzhiev's time, Verkhneudinsk) in the current autonomous republic of Buryatia in the Wood Tiger Year of the 14th sixty-year cycle of the Kalachakra calendar (1854 according to the Gregorian calendar). A precocious student with obvious linguistic talents he soon excelled in Russian—his native language was Buryat—and, oddly enough for the time and place, French. He showed an early interest in Buddhism and quickly added Tibetan, the language of most religious texts, to his résumé. At the age of thirteen he received an Amitayus Long-Life Empowerment from a local lama, who also advised him to go to Tibet for further studies.

Tibet, however, was far off; and Dorzhiev's means were limited. *Örgöö*, in Mongolia, was much closer, and it was there that Dorzhiev went a year later, in 1868. He took the precepts of an *upsaka*, or religious layman, restraining himself from killing, stealing, lying, irresponsible sexual activity, and the use of intoxicants. Apparently at this point he was not totally convinced of his religious vocation and not yet ready to become a fully ordained monk. Instead he soon married a woman named Kholintsog and may have fathered a child—coitus in the married state not being considered irresponsible sexual activity. He quickly discovered that "the household life, both in this and future births, is like sinking into a swamp of misery."[48] After consulting with his teacher, the revered Mongolian lama Penchen Chomphel, he decided to advance a further step on the path of his religious vocation by taking the vows of a celibate layman, or *ubashi*. At this point wife and purported child disappear from his *curriculum vitae*, never to be heard from again.

For the really serious student of Buddhism there was only one ultimate destination—Lhasa, the lodestar of Inner Asian Buddhists. Dambijantsan himself had reached this conclusion. Dorzhiev was nothing if not ambitious and he soon trained his sights on the Tibetan capital, where he hoped to eventually acquire the degree of *geshé*, the Buddhist equivalent of a doctorate. But here we get the first whiff of intrigue that was to hover like a miasma around Dorzhiev for the rest of his life. Historian of Russian and Tibetan relations Alexandre Andreyev has speculated that even at this early date Dorzhiev may have working for Russian intelligences services. Documents in the archives of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society propose "sending one or more Buryat Buddhists to Lhasa . . . with a Mongolian mission which was to bring

back to Urga a new incarnation of the recently deceased Khutukhtu."[49] The Buryats were to concern themselves with "intelligence gathering."

According to one source Dorzhiev and Penchen Chomphel left Mongolia for Lhasa in the winter of 1873. They may well have been accompanying the caravan sent to bring back the little Tibetan boy, a relative of the Dalai Lama, who had determined to be the 8th Bogd Gegeen. As mentioned, all Europeans and citizens of the Russia empire were still strictly barred from entering Tibet at this time, and Dorzhiev, although a Buryat and a Buddhist, was still a citizen of Russia. Thus he went along on the caravan disguised as a Khalkh Mongol attendant to Penchen Chomphel. This was quite a dangerous undertaking for the Buryat. If exposed he would have been subjected to severe punishments, perhaps even ending up in a Tibetan dungeon. Any Tibetan who aided him risked having his property confiscated, or might have even be sewed up in a leather bag and thrown into the Tsangpo River to drown, the fate of Lama Senchen, the Shigatse monk who in the early 1880s had befriended the Indian pundit Chandra Das, who was in the pay of the British.

In Lhasa Dorzhiev found temporary refuge at Gomang College in Drepung Monastery. Here he could blend in with Mongolian monks who would be unlikely to expose him even if they know his true status. We cannot say for sure if Dambijantsan was there at the time. If our chronology is correct he entered the monastery at Dolonnuur around 1867 but we do not know how long he studied there before moving on to Drepung in Tibet. If they were both at Drepung at they had one thing in common; as Russian citizens they were both in Tibet illegally. Dambijantsan, perhaps already at this time a master of assumed identities, did not seem to have a problem, but word seems to have leaked about Dorzhiev's true origins. His position precarious and running low on funds, he decided to forgo for the moment his dream of pursuing Buddhist studies in Lhasa and instead return to Örgöö. Here the record is clearer; he and Penchen Chomphel did accompany the caravan bringing the little four-year old 8th Bogd Gegeen to Mongolia.[50]

The Tibetan monk Luvsanchoijinimadanzinbanchug (1870–1924) was the twenty-third incarnation of Javzandamba and eighth in the line of Bogd Gegeens of Mongolia established by Zanabazar. He would witness the fall of the Qing Dynasty and oversee the rise of an independent state of Mongolia; in additional to his role as head of Buddhism in Mongolia he would eventually be crowned king of Mongolia; and he would live to see his power usurped by the Bolshevik communists who had seized control of the country in 1922. As his life was inextricably intertwined with that of Dambijantsan's we will have more to say about him later.

By the time Dorzhiev returned to Örgöö he had decided on his religious vocation. At the age of twenty-one he was given full ordination as a monk

by Penchen Chomphel and began studies with a number of other venerable monks who initiated him into various tantric practices, including the sadhana of Vajrabhairava, which would become his life-long practice. He also studied at monasteries at Wutai Shan in Shanxi Province, China, a mountain (actually a cluster of five peaks) dedicated to Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. He had not given up his dreams of continuing his studies in Lhasa, however. Informed by knowledgeable lamas at Wutai Shan that the obstacles he had previously faced could be overcome by generous offerings to monasteries and officials in Lhasa, he returned to Buryatia and managed to solicit a considerable amount of alms from his fellow countrymen, duly impressed as they were by the energetic and charismatic monk who already seemed destined for greater things. Part of this booty was given to Dzasak Rinpoche, a high-ranking lama at Wutai Shan. This worthy, who apparently had good connections in Tibet, smooth the way for Dorzhiev's trip back to Lhasa and even determined an auspicious time for him to leave on his journey.

The twenty-six year old Dorzhiev arrived back in the Tibetan capital in 1880. Upon his arrival he made generous offerings to the Big Three monasteries of Sera, and Gandan, and Drepung, with an extra and especially munificent donation to Gomang College at Drepung. "By this means," relates his biographer, "which may not exactly have been bribery, but something very much like it, the earnest and energetic young Buryat was able 'to create favourable conditions for my studies'".[51] The matter of his Russian citizenship was for the time being forgotten.

Dorzhiev's subsequent career at Lhasa was nothing short of meteoric. He studied with some of the most distinguished lamas in Tibet and in 1888, just eight years after his arrival in Lhasa, he was awarded the Buddhist equivalent of a doctorate, passing the exams with the highest honors. Normally it took fifteen or twenty year to earn such a degree. "It is . . . a little puzzling how he managed to complete the course so quickly," observes his biographer, "for there is usually a waiting list and ample funds are necessary to pass the final hurdles. Everything points to Dorzhiev having an influential patron and sponsor. Perhaps money was reaching him from Russia—and perhaps from high places in Russia. Naturally he is reticent about anything of this kind."[52] He immediately began instructing Mongolian and Buryat students in Buddhistic logic and metaphysic and soon became "a recognized member of the monastic elite."[53]

All this would pale in comparison to his next assignment. That same year, 1888, he was appointed as tutor of the-then twelve-year old Thirteenth Dalai Lama. For the next ten years he was the Dalai Lama' 'inseparable attendant," himself instructing the Dalai Lama on a near-daily basis and present when other lamas gave him initiations into the highest teachings of Vajrayana Bud-

dhism. He would also eventually rank as the Dalai Lama's closest political advisor. The fact that he was a Russian citizen had been forgiven but not forgotten. Some in the Dalai Lama's entourage were appalled that a foreigner should have became the religious leader's right hand man, and they intrigued to have him dismissed and thrown out of Tibet. But he had the support of the Dalai Lama himself and all their objections were in vain. The Buryat monk who had first slunk into Lhasa in disguise had become one of the most powerful men in the country.

Indeed, to this day Dorzhiev has not been forgotten at Drepung Monastery. When questioning monks there in 2001 about Zanabazar, the First Bogd Gegeen of Mongolia, I described him as "a famous Mongolian lama who had once studied at Drepung." The monk I was talking to at first thought I was referring to "Ngawang Losang, the Mongolian monk from Russia." This was of course Dorzhiev. (It turned out he also knew about Zanabazar, and was even aware that the Ninth Bogd Gegeen is now living in India.)

Much of Dorzhiev's subsequent career lies outside the scope of our narrative. Suffice it to add here that he became the leader of the pro-Russian faction in the Tibetan court, and the British would use his Great Game intrigues with Russia, intended as they were to bring Tibet into the Russian sphere of influence, to justified their 1904 invasion of Tibet by the Younghusband Expedition. The Dalai Lama, accompanied by Dorzhiev, would flee Tibet in advance of the British invasion and eventually turn up in Örgöö, now Ulaan Baatar, the capital of Mongolia. And we will see that in addition to their probable encounter at Drepung, Dorzhiev is linked with Dambijantsan several more times, so we might well have to return to his story later on.

Given his apparent talents, Dambijantsan, like Dorzheiv, might have gone to beome a teacher himself at Drepung or some other monastery and eventually become a high-ranking lama in the Buddhist hierarchy. It was not to be. According to Roerich, "From his youth, he manifested an ambitous, impestous, and cruel character." This aspect of his character now came to the fore. "It is generally said," continues Roerich, "that he killed his roommate in the monastery because of a dispute and had to flee Llhasa in order to escape from the stern monastic law. This fact is generally known in Tibet and Mongolia."[54]

Obviously any advancement in the monastic world was now impossible. A new stage of Dambijantsan's life was about to begin. As Roerich notes, "It seems the murder was the crucial pont of his life for from then on begins his life as an errant warrior monk, full of wonderful adventures, messianic prophecies, and cruel deeds."[55]

Later in life, when he was living in Mongolia, Dambijantsan regaled A. V. Burdukov with tales of his earlier travels, including soujourns in India. Maisky

and Roerich also heard tell of these Indian travels. It is never quite clear when he went to India, but we might surmize that after killing his roommate he might have found it wise to remove himself to the Indian subcontinent and thereby escape severe punishment for the crime of murder from the monastic and perhaps civil authorities in Tibet. Dambijantsan, already deeply steeped in metaphysics and tantric teachings, would have found himself at home among the various yogis, fakirs, magicians, and itinerant savants of India, and would have ample opportunities for learning and expanding the wide variety of talents he would exhibit in later life. He would become legendary for his skills at hypnosis, clairvoyance, mind-reading, fortune telling and other arcane arts which were the stock and trade of India's holy men. What talents he may have had in these areas would have been further honed during his stay on the subcontinent. By the early 1930s, almost a decade after his death, these Indian adventures had became an accepted part of his *curriculum vitae*. Henning Haslund at that time picked up the story circulating around the campfires of Mongolia that Dambijantsan "himself asserted that he acquired in India the supernatural qualities of the fakirs." Beyond this we can add northing about Dambijantsan's alleged Indian interlude.

At some point in time in the early 1880s Dambijantsan may have gone back to Russia. In any event, he somehow managed to attach himself to the 1883–85 Inner Asian Expedition of Russian explorer and zoologist N. M. Przhevalsky (1839-1888). Przhevalsky's earlier 1870–1873 expedition had been first serious Russian attempt to penetrate the maidenhead of virginal—at least from the Russian viewpoint—Tibet. On this first try he reached the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and the vicinity of the headwaters of the Yangtze River before being forced to turn back. A later expedition in 1879-80, this one authorized by the Czar and backed up by a formidable detachment of armed-to-the-teeth Cossacks, got to within 150 miles of Lhasa before encountering a large contingent of the Tibetan army. In the ensuing stand-off Przhevalsky finally backed down. "Let someone else, a luckier traveler than me, proceed farther into Asia. I have done everything I could do and that was possible to do," pouted the disheartened explorer.[56] Russians, unlike the English a few decades later, were not yet ready to shoot their way into Lhasa.

Interestingly, upon his return to Russia Przhevalsky prepared a memorandum in which he proposed pushing the Russian border with Mongolia down to about the latitude of Örgöö, now Ulaan Baatar. Russian geographers, it seems, had opined that the mountains and mixed forest-steppe from the vicinity of Örgöö northward were really a continuation of Siberia, and thus based on landforms the border should run along the crest of Bogd Khan Uul (mountain) just south of Örgöö, beyond which lies the treeless steppe, desert steppe, and deserts of Mongolia proper. Thus Örgöö would then be in Russia.

Przhevalsky had a religio-political motive for this proposal:

> In future, should the English want to penetrate into Tibet from India, it is very likely that the Dalai Lama would move his residence to Urga, towards his most ardent believers there, the Mongols. Then, by, possessing Urga and patronizing the Dalai Lama, we would be able to influence the entire Buddhist world.

Przhevalsky was surprisingly prescient here. As already mentioned, in 1904 the English Younghusband Expedition did invade Tibet and the 13th Dalai Lama did flee to Örgöö. Of course Przhevalsky's proposal to move the border south had not been taken serious and at the time Örgöö was still the capital of Mongolia and not a Russian city.

Przhevalsky's 1883–1885 expedition started at Kyakhta, the entrepôt on the Russian-Mongolian border, proceeded south, presumably through Örgöö, to the Gobi Desert and then westward to the eastern spurs of the Tian Shan Mountains in Xinjiang. The expedition then veered off to the sources of Yangtze River and Qinghai Lake in modern-day Qinghai Province, China, continued on westwards to Khotan, on the southern edge of the Takhlimakan Desert, and finally northward to the huge lake of Issyk Kol in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. Thus the three-year-long expedition traversed a huge swatch of Inner Asia but did not enter Tibet proper.

Dambijantsan reportedly accompanied the expedition as one of its eighteen armed escorts. At this time he was traveling under the Russian alias Irinchinov. A photograph of the escorts showing Dambijantsan at the far left is, according to one researcher, "the first pictorial record of the charismatic adventurer that can be traced hitherto."[57] Dambijantsan was already familiar with Inner Mongolia from his stay at Dolonuur, and assuming that he joined the expedition at its beginning in Khyakhta he now would have had ample opportunities to spy out the land of the Khalkh, the current-day country of Mongolia. At this time, however, he was just a hired-hand traveling under an alias and had not yet assumed the role of Ja Lama, the descendant/incarnation of Amarsanaa come to free the Mongols from the yoke of the Manchus. Yet we may assume that the ambitious adventurer had his eyes wide open, and was even at this point plotting his dramatic reappearance in Mongolia as the leader of a liberation movement.

There are unsubstaniated rumors that Dambijantsan had earlier accompanied the expedition of Russian explorer Grigory Nikolayaevich Potanin (1836–1920), who traveled through western Mongolia in the years 1876–77, with stays in the towns of Khovd and Uliastai (Potanin Glacier, which flows off Khuiten Uul, the highest peak in Mongolia, in Bayan-Ölgii Aimag, is named after the Russian explorer). This claim is part of Dambijantsan lore

repeated to this day in Khovd Aimag, although there does not appear to be any written documentation to support it. In any case, Khovd City and Uliastai would later play important roles in the Dambijantsan saga, and it is quite possible that he visited them before he assumed the role of Ja Lama.

While it is easy to imagine a gun-toting Dambijantsan as part of an armed escort on expeditions to the remote fastnesses of Inner Asia, it is a bit more difficult to picture him as a lawyer with a briefcase stalking the halls of a courthouse. Yet while in Mongolia in 1927 painter, mystic, Shambhalist Nicholas Roerich, father of already mentioned George Roerich, would hear that Dambijantsan, "no ordinary bandit," was "a graduate of law from Petrograd University."[58] For a moment a vision rises before us of Dambijantsan, a Kalmyk Mongol from the sun-drenched Caspian Steppes, striding the cobblestone streets of Peter the Great's gray, gloomy city by the Gulf of Finland. Irina Lomakina, Dambijantsan's indefatigable Russian biographer, took the time to track down even this flimsy lead and came away with a different picture:

> I couldn't believe it at all [that Dambijantsan had studied law in St. Petersburg], so I decided to consult the historical archives of St. Petersburg, where the records of the university is stored, in order to check on whether this information was true or not. Fortunately, there was the card index of all the students who studied at that university before the revolution. I searched very carefully for any of the names which the Ja Lama may have used but didn't find any. Moreover, I looked through all the personal files of students, entrance application forms, graduation certificates of the gymnasium, college graduation diplomas, exam papers, course papers, application forms for the higher education courses, etc. . . .[59]

She found nothing and by the end must have seriously regretted Roerich's off-hand comment about Dambijantsan's studies in St. Petersburg. Thus whatever else Dambijantsan was guilty of in his long and eventful life he cannot be accused of being a lawyer.

Dambijantsan himself claimed that he "served as one of the Ta Lamas or Heads of Department in the Chang-skya Khutughtu [Jangjya Khutagt) *yamen* at Peking, a learned ecclesiastical institution entrusted with the fixing of the calendar and other astronomical and metaphysical questions."[60] The Jangjya Khutagts were as we have seen incarnate lamas connected with the monasteries in Dolonnuur where Dambijantsan may have studied as a boy. The fourth Jangjya Khutagt, who would have been alive at the time in question, was very seldom in attendance at Dolonnuur and lived almost full-time in Beijing.

The Songzhu Monastery in the old Imperial city was his full time residence

in the capital. This ancient Chinese monastery, which specialized in printing sutras during the Ming Dynasty, was converted into a Tibetan monastery in 1712 by the Kangxi emperor. In 1724 it was given to Rölpé Dorjé, the second Jangjya Khutagt, and served as the residence of the subsequent Jangjya Khutagts. It did not appear, however, to have been a "learned ecclesiastical institution" of the kind where Dambijantsan supposedly served. The Yonghe Gong was the main academic monastery of Beijing, with various colleges that dealt with astronomy and calendar making, medicine, and various esoteric studies, and this may be the institution of which Dambijantsan made mention. Whether he was actually one of the Ta (or *Da*) Lamas there is another question altogether. Since the position would have acquired considerable academic credentials he could have held the post only after his studies at Drepung. But after his stay at Drepung he was wanted for murder in Tibet, and this would seem to preclude him from holding a high position in a Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist institution in Beijing. Either officials in Beijing were unaware of his past, or he had just made up this episode about being a Da Lama in Beijing to further burnish his reputation after he began a famous man in Mongolia.

I have covered most everything known about the first three decades of Dambijantsan's life. At the age of thirty, Dambijantsan was, like Jesus at the same age, ready to begin his life in earnest. He was about to assume a new persona: the descendant of Amarsanaa returning to the land of the Mongols in order to free them from their Qing oppressors. Up until now 1890 he had, in effect, been in training. Now he was ready to become the Ja Lama.